



Novel Insights, An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal
ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Volume-I, Issue-IV, May 2025, Page No. 231-238

Published by Uttarsuri, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.1.issue.04W.024



Culinary Cartographies: A Postcolonial Analysis of Indigenous Foodways in Arunachal Pradesh

Dr. Subhashis Banerjee, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kohima Campus, Nagaland University (A Central University), Nagaland, India

Received: 04.05.2025; Accepted: 14.05.2025; Available online: 31.05.2025

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Abstract

This paper explores how indigenous cuisine functions as a vital cultural marker and a site of postcolonial resistance in Arunachal Pradesh, a region rich in ethnic diversity and culinary traditions. Framed within the lens of postcolonial theory, it investigates the symbolic, performative, and epistemic functions of food among tribal communities such as the Nyishi, Apatani, Adi, and Monpa. Indigenous food practices in Arunachal Pradesh are not merely matters of sustenance; they are deeply embedded in rituals, ecological consciousness, kinship structures, and identity formations. Through oral histories, ethnographic records, and literary representations, this study reveals how colonial disruptions and contemporary globalisation have threatened traditional foodways while also prompting cultural resilience. Drawing on theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper argues that food becomes a powerful medium through which marginalised voices assert autonomy, memory, and heritage. By examining fermented bamboo shoots, smoked meats, millet brews, and foraged herbs, the study situates cuisine as an archive of indigenous knowledge and as a living testimony to cultural continuity in the face of epistemic violence. Ultimately, this research affirms the role of food in reclaiming agency and decolonising identity within the Northeast Indian context.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Indigenous Cuisine, Arunachal Pradesh, Cultural Identity, Foodways.

Introduction:

The politics of food, particularly in postcolonial societies, transcends the boundaries of consumption. It becomes a signifier of cultural memory, resistance, and rootedness. In Arunachal Pradesh, the northeastern most state of India, indigenous food traditions remain deeply connected to geography, ancestry, and spiritual praxis. These traditions serve not only nutritional purposes but also reinforce kinship structures, spiritual ideologies, and ecological ethics, thereby resisting the impositions of colonial and global homogenisation. This research seeks to critically examine how traditional cuisines of Arunachal Pradesh function as cultural markers, especially within the framework of postcolonial theory, where the local resists the homogenising tendencies of the global and the colonial.

In postcolonial discourse, foodways are increasingly acknowledged as a terrain where identities are articulated and contested. In Arunachal Pradesh, the ritual preparation of dishes, the seasonal variation in ingredients, and the oral transmission of recipes all constitute a living cultural heritage. The ongoing encroachment of fast-food culture, commercial farming, and modern dietary practices threatens the survival of these indigenous practices. Yet, the people of Arunachal Pradesh continue to inscribe their cultural autonomy through the everyday act of cooking and eating, transforming their cuisine into a site of political resistance and cultural affirmation.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism and the Edible Archive

Postcolonial theory, as advanced by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, focuses on the marginalised voices and epistemologies suppressed by colonial domination. The theory investigates how cultural hegemony is constructed and how resistance emerges through everyday practices. Bhabha's concept of hybridity (Bhabha 112) becomes pertinent when we consider how indigenous food has been appropriated, modified, or erased in the wake of colonial and modernist interventions. Food, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai contends, serves as a medium of cultural expression and identity assertion (Appadurai 5).

The term 'edible archive' encapsulates the idea that food practices serve as repositories of communal memory and subaltern knowledge. Spivak's notion of the subaltern (Spivak 283) is crucial here, as indigenous cuisine offers a platform for those silenced by dominant historical narratives to reclaim their agency. Recipes, ingredients, and methods preserved by oral tradition become testimonies to a history of endurance, ecological wisdom, and cultural ingenuity.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, although primarily applied to the Middle East and Asia, also resonates in the way North East India has been represented in culinary terms. Indigenous diets were often depicted as strange, repugnant, or unsophisticated. In this light, reclaiming traditional foodways becomes a counter-hegemonic act that reconfigures the gaze imposed by colonial modernity.

Indigenous Communities and Culinary Practices in Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is home to over 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, each with distinct culinary traditions. These foodways are not mere gastronomic curiosities; they are deeply rooted in the natural world, governed by ritual cycles and environmental ethics. The Nyishi community, for instance, consumes bamboo shoots (eko) and smoked meats, which are not just food items but embodiments of ecological symbiosis and ancestral lineage. Such practices reflect a spiritual cosmology in which the forest and the household coalesce into a continuum.

The Apatani people, settled in the ecologically sensitive Ziro Valley, are known for their unique paddy-cum-fish farming system. Here, fermented foods like tapyo (fermented rice paste) are more than culinary artefacts; they signal a historical continuity of sustainable living. The preservation of these foodways also contributes to biodiversity conservation, as local ingredients and seeds are cultivated through indigenous farming techniques.

Among the Adi community, the diet includes foraged greens, smoked pork, and boiled herbs, all of which are consumed with opo, a rice-based local beer. Meals are typically prepared communally, reinforcing social bonds and collective identities. For the Monpa

tribe, culinary practices include butter tea, yak meat, and barley dishes that are influenced by Tibetan Buddhism but retain distinct local variations. These practices are integrated into religious festivals like Losar, Nyokum, and Solung, where the preparation and sharing of food becomes a cultural performance that reaffirms communal solidarity.

In these contexts, cuisine becomes a marker of identity, an environmental act, and a cultural expression all at once. It is in such seemingly mundane practices that the politics of identity are negotiated, internalised, and passed on to successive generations.

Colonial Disruption and Culinary Suppression:

British colonial administration in Northeast India was primarily concerned with cartographic control, trade routes, and resource extraction. Yet, the cultural and dietary habits of the indigenous peoples were not immune from colonial scrutiny. In the ethnographic documentation produced during the Raj, indigenous food practices were often exoticised or infantilised, branded as 'primitive' or 'uncivilised' (Elwin 94). The colonial discourse constructed a dietary hierarchy that valorised wheat, tea, and processed sugar while denigrating millet, tubers, and fermented products.

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, observed that food customs were among the first elements targeted by colonisers seeking to erode indigenous autonomy (Fanon 210). In Arunachal Pradesh, traditional food practices were viewed through a lens of moral superiority. Missionaries, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, actively discouraged the consumption of local brews and ceremonial meat offerings, labelling them as pagan or demonic. As a result, the community's culinary expressions underwent either suppression or forced adaptation to align with colonial and Christian moralities.

Moreover, colonial medical discourses deemed fermented foods and indigenous brewing practices as unhygienic, thus creating a medicalised rationale for cultural erasure. These scientific justifications were undergirded by a civilisational logic that sought to replace indigenous foodways with European models of nutrition and discipline. In doing so, colonisation not only robbed people of their land but also sought to displace their bodily and spiritual nourishment.

Postcolonial Resistance Through Culinary Practice:

Despite such disruptions, communities in Arunachal Pradesh have preserved and revitalised their culinary heritages. Postcolonial resilience is evident in the continued use of traditional fermentation methods, the preservation of food lexicons in indigenous languages, and the documentation of recipes as oral archives. This aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'provincializing Europe' – resisting Eurocentric epistemologies through the re-centring of local knowledge systems (Chakrabarty 16).

Indigenous culinary practices have become potent forms of symbolic resistance. During festivals and community gatherings, traditional cuisine is foregrounded as a marker of pride and authenticity. These occasions serve as performative enactments of heritage, affirming a sense of collective identity that defies homogenising narratives.

Youth-led initiatives have emerged that document and disseminate traditional recipes using digital platforms. Social media pages, YouTube channels, and community cookbooks are not only archiving endangered recipes but also transforming culinary practices into political statements. These efforts recontextualise indigenous food as a subject worthy of academic inquiry, artistic representation, and cultural pride.

In addition, indigenous women – traditionally the custodians of food knowledge – are now actively participating in regional food festivals, culinary entrepreneurship, and agro-ecological initiatives. Their expertise is being reclaimed as a form of intellectual and cultural labour, challenging both patriarchal invisibility and colonial silencing. This shift reflects Spivak's call to 'let the subaltern speak' (Spivak 308), here enacted through the medium of food.

The act of cooking itself becomes a political act – a ritual of survival, a mnemonic invocation, and a proclamation of identity. Through such practices, the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh contest the epistemic violence of colonial narratives and reassert their autonomy. In reclaiming the kitchen as a space of memory, resistance, and creativity, they chart a future rooted in ancestral wisdom.

Thus, in the broader postcolonial discourse, the foodways of Arunachal Pradesh exemplify how everyday acts of sustenance become extraordinary acts of resistance.

Culinary Hybridity and Globalisation:

Contemporary Arunachali cuisine is a vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of ancestral wisdom and modern innovation. In the urban culinary landscapes of Itanagar and Ziro, dishes such as smoked pork momo, nettle soup with tofu, or bamboo shoot pasta exemplify this blend. These are not mere fusions for novelty's sake but are reflective of cultural metamorphosis. The inclusion of pasta – a symbol of Western culinary identity – alongside bamboo shoot, an indigenous staple, signals a gastronomic dialogue. This act of culinary negotiation resonates with Homi Bhabha's theorisation of cultural hybridity, wherein the colonised subject creates a "third space" that is neither entirely native nor colonial but a new cultural expression forged through tension and negotiation (Bhabha 122).

This evolving foodscape might be interpreted by cultural purists as a departure from authenticity. Yet, the postcolonial reading of hybridity recognises that such amalgamations are often born from resilience rather than loss. As Arunachal Pradesh experiences increased connectivity and tourism, food becomes both a symbol of identity and a commodity. The new forms reflect not erasure but adaptation – a form of culinary diplomacy, where the past is neither abandoned nor preserved in amber, but consciously carried forward in new avatars.

However, this hybridity is not without its dilemmas. The increasing commercialisation of indigenous dishes risks diluting their original contexts. Traditional fermentation methods, once conducted within communal frameworks tied to ecological cycles, are now industrially mimicked to meet urban demand. As these foods enter the hospitality and tourism industries, they are often rebranded to cater to non-native sensibilities. This echoes what scholars describe as the neoliberal repackaging of indigeneity – where cultural artefacts are detached from their social roots and sold as exotic experiences. The violence of colonial consumption, once enacted through epistemic erasure, now reappears through commodification under capitalism. Thus, the postcolonial subject, caught between self-representation and market forces, must navigate the fraught terrain of cultural preservation versus adaptive transformation.

Food and Memory: The Role of Oral Traditions:

Among the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, food is far more than a material necessity – it is a vessel of memory, belief, and moral instruction. Recipes, when examined

closely, resemble narrative scripts. They are not stored in cookbooks but inscribed in the oral tradition—transmitted through lullabies, work songs, seasonal chants, and myths. The Nyishi tale of the hunter who learns to tame the forest through fermented bamboo is emblematic of this tradition. On one level, the story entertains and instructs. On another, it encodes ecological ethics—valorising sustainable harvesting and fermentation not as techniques, but as sacred acts of living in sync with the land.

Such culinary myths are performative archives. They do not simply preserve the past; they enact it. Each telling, each repetition of the recipe during seasonal rituals, becomes a moment of collective remembrance. Through food, tribes transmit not only their culinary preferences but their cosmologies—of how to treat the forest, how to harvest fish with respect, or how to share harvests within the clan. These narratives hold within them a form of ecological knowledge that resists reduction to scientific categories.

Temsula Ao, writing from the neighbouring Naga cultural context, captures this essence when she refers to the ‘aroma of memory’ that lingers in tribal kitchens (Ao 65). The smell of smoked meat or wild herbs, she argues, is often the first conduit through which memories of childhood, family, and cultural belonging are retrieved. Among the Adi, Apatani, and Tagin communities, similar sensorial connections emerge. For instance, the act of slow-roasting river fish wrapped in banana leaves may recall the harvesting festivals of one’s youth, replete with chants and communal eating. These culinary acts become rituals of remembrance—reaffirming identity in a rapidly changing world.

In this sense, indigenous food functions as a mnemonic device. It enables a community to locate itself in emotional geography—a map not marked by political borders but by flavours, aromas, and shared meals. This form of culinary memory, rooted in the oral, also acts as a counter-archive. It preserves those aspects of history and identity often erased in written records, particularly during colonial rule when indigenous ways of knowing were dismissed as primitive.

Food, Gender, and Labour:

A deeper postcolonial analysis of food in Arunachal Pradesh must inevitably turn towards the gendered dynamics of culinary labour. Across the diverse tribal communities of the state, it is women who bear the primary responsibility for food production, preservation, and distribution. Yet their role in this crucial cultural transmission is seldom recognised beyond the domestic sphere. From selecting the right wood for smoking meat, to knowing which seasonal herbs heal or harm, indigenous women are repositories of knowledge—what might be termed eco-cultural capital.

This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critique of the erasure of Third World women’s agency within both colonial and nationalist discourses. In *Feminism Without Borders*, Mohanty emphasises that native women are not mere victims of tradition but are active agents in sustaining, modifying, and challenging cultural practices (Mohanty 69). In Arunachal, women’s engagement with food illustrates this vividly. The task of fermenting bamboo shoots or crafting millet beer is not mechanical labour—it involves precise timing, spatial understanding, and spiritual discipline.

Yet these contributions often remain undervalued because they fall outside textual authorship and institutional frameworks. Tribal culinary knowledge is rarely documented in formal publications, which contributes to the marginalisation of women as knowledge

bearers. Their absence in the 'record' reinforces a form of gendered epistemic injustice. Reclaiming their role, therefore, is not only an act of feminist affirmation but also an ethical imperative in decolonising food histories.

Moreover, in many communities, the kitchen is a site of informal apprenticeship. Young girls learn by watching and doing, often under the guidance of mothers or grandmothers. These acts of intergenerational transmission are deeply political. They ensure cultural survival in the face of external threats—from state displacement projects to climate-induced loss of biodiversity. Cooking, in this context, is not just nourishment but pedagogy and resistance.

In the age of rapid urbanisation, where processed food and instant mixes are gaining popularity, these practices are under threat. Many younger women migrate to cities for education or employment, often returning with altered dietary habits. The challenge then is to retain respect for traditional foodways without restricting women's autonomy or mobility. Hence, culinary labour becomes a site of negotiation—between rootedness and mobility, preservation and change.

Towards a Decolonial Culinary Future:

The renewed engagement with indigenous food practices in Arunachal Pradesh signals far more than a passing trend; it is a radical act of cultural reclamation and resistance against the twin legacies of colonialism and globalised capitalism. This revival is intricately linked to the broader decolonial project, which seeks to dismantle dominant epistemologies imposed through historical subjugation and to reassert the validity and richness of local knowledge systems. At the heart of this movement lies the principle of food sovereignty—a community's inherent right to determine its own food policies, agricultural methods, culinary narratives, and systems of distribution without the imposition of external control. Unlike models that treat food as a global commodity driven by market demands and monocultural efficiency, food sovereignty reaffirms the relationality between people, land, memory, and seasonal rhythm. Organisations such as the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) have been central in documenting and reviving hundreds of indigenous plant species, along with their corresponding culinary applications, thereby challenging the idea that progress lies in standardisation or imported agricultural logic. This process is not one of mere preservation—which often connotes static museumisation—but of revitalisation, where ancestral foodways are reanimated through daily practice, intergenerational transmission, and community celebration. Food festivals organised at the grassroots level do not merely exhibit regional dishes but create participatory platforms for elders to share knowledge, for youth to re-learn heritage, and for culinary methods to evolve in continuity rather than rupture. Community seed banks, for instance, serve not only as storage units for biodiversity but as archives of collective memory and ecological intuition, embodying a politics of care and sustainability that resists the extractive ethos of industrial agriculture. Organic farming cooperatives emerging across tribal regions of Arunachal are rooted in principles of reciprocity and cyclical regeneration, aligning more with indigenous cosmologies than with Western linearity. These practices constitute a culinary activism wherein everyday acts of cooking, foraging, fermenting, and seed-saving transform into political expressions of autonomy. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of 'unlearning privilege,' often invoked in postcolonial discourse, finds practical expression here as both scholar and practitioner are urged to recognise and defer to

embodied, oral, and gendered forms of indigenous wisdom—forms which have historically been excluded from academic or state-sanctioned domains. The act of acknowledging women's culinary labour, the communal ethics of food distribution, or the ritualistic dimensions of planting cycles, all demand a shift from the consumer-centric gaze to one of epistemic humility. The rejection of imported food ideals—such as uniform packaging, frozen storage, and chemical processing—also underscores a deliberate departure from the Western fixation on efficiency and spectacle. Instead, the emphasis in decolonial food cultures remains on seasonality, localised taste, spiritual harmony with the ecosystem, and respect for each ingredient's temporal integrity. Within this matrix, the concept of hybridity—so often trivialised in global cuisine as mere fusion—takes on a critical valence. It becomes less about superficial novelty and more about creative continuity: a negotiation that honours the indigenous culinary grammar even while absorbing new influences in a culturally grounded manner. This nuanced hybridity allows communities to adapt without surrendering their core ethics, crafting dishes that are not betrayals of tradition but extensions of it. Arunachali food systems, thus, stand as defiant alternatives to the monocultures of both agriculture and thought—epistemic monocultures that reduce food to calorie, soil to commodity, and eating to transaction. The rhythms of millet cultivation, the rituals of fermentation, the collective preparation of festival feasts—all reveal how food is not just an act of consumption but a living archive of cosmology, identity, and resistance. As global pressures escalate—from climate change to food insecurity—such indigenous practices offer more than symbolic inspiration; they provide concrete models of resilience, adaptability, and ethical sustenance. To eat in accordance with these traditions is to engage in a daily act of remembering: not just recalling a lost past, but asserting a living present built on relational integrity and ecological balance. It is also an act of resistance, defying homogenisation and asserting the legitimacy of ways of knowing that have long been dismissed or suppressed. Therefore, the culinary future envisioned in Arunachal Pradesh is not one of passive revival but of active remaking—where food becomes a language through which communities reclaim authorship of their stories, revalue their ecosystems, and resist the epistemic violence that sought to erase them. In this context, the kitchen emerges not merely as a domestic space but as a decolonial theatre—where ingredients are not just selected but invoked, where meals are not just prepared but performed, and where the act of eating itself becomes a cultural and political affirmation. The aroma of indigenous rice, the careful slicing of wild yam, the patient brewing of herbal teas—these are not incidental rituals but expressions of autonomy, history, and futurity, each mouthful charged with ancestral resilience and visionary hope. Thus, the evolving culinary practices of Arunachal Pradesh are emblematic of a larger struggle for dignity, memory, and cultural sovereignty, asserting through taste what centuries of domination have tried to suppress—that indigenous life, knowledge, and cuisine not only endure but flourish when reclaimed on their own terms.

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